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Great waters, great prairies... Great Places?

By Russ Mitchell
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Representatives from Clay and Dickinson County want to be part of a state program designed to help local visions get a foothold.

The Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs received 145 invitations from places wanting to partner with the state to be a part of the "Great Places" initiative. About 75 coaches from throughout state govern-

ment will be dispatched in teams to places that submitted invitations.

The "Great Places" initiative was announced at the start of the 2005 Legislative session and is designed to streamline state programs to minimize the bureaucratic hurdles that at times hinder work on a local project.

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As part of the process, the state's Great Places Citizen Advisory Board received an invitation from "The Great Waters and Great Prairies of Clay & Dickinson Counties Organizing Team" on June 23.

That keeps the area in the running to be selected as one of three pilot Great Places, which will receive a package of resources and will serve as a learning laboratory for the new program.

"It's a breakthrough approach that demystifies state government," said the state's cultural affairs director, Anita Walker. "Rather than building a dream piecemeal, we will provide a one-stop shop. We'll work together to synchronize and streamline programs to fit a place's vision, not to make the vision fit our programs. Our goal is to work in collaboration with local leaders, combine resources for high impact and deliver results."

Curtis Dean of Spencer was part of the Waters & Prairies team that extended the local invitation to state officials. Clay County representatives on the team are Dean, John Goede, Barb McGee, Amelia Painter and Lynn Swan. Dickinson County members are Steve Anderson, Sheryl Hall, Abbey Larson and Deidre Rosenboom.

"At this point, we don't know what that's going to become," Dean said. "Right now it's a concept and it's something the state is hoping we can use to bring resources to bear. It may or may

not wind up being something that has tangible benefits for the area, but in the process of taking about Great Places as a project, it really got us thinking about the whole regionalism idea. We've done a lot of regional cooperation on economic development."

Dean said there seems to be a consensus among the people who have attended the local Great Places meetings that area leaders need to work together in marketing the area. The Lakes area community and the Spencer area community have misconceptions about each other, he said.

"One of the issues that will come up in this process is: If you're going to do something, where are you going to do it? In other words, if you do something in Spirit Lake, well you need to do something in Spencer, too," Dean said. "Or you'll need to do it somewhere in the middle and then Fostoria wins because they're in the middle. Part of the process will be to get people out of that way of thinking. Start to get people to think 'well, if it's in Spencer, great, but if it's in Milford or Spirit Lake or Okoboji, it's great too,' because it's going to draw people to the region and while they're here, they're going to go to both areas and it's going to be a win-win for everyone."

Dean also said the local effort doesn't have strict territorial boundaries.

"It's a fuzzy border," Dean said. "And in this fuzzy border we have great waters in both the lake and in the Little Sioux River.

We have great land – both in terms of agricultural farm land and wide open prairies and all of the benefits there – and we have great people. The word 'great' keeps popping up, but it really is true, so let's figure out how we can promote the area."

Benefits for the three pilot "Places" could range from a large construction project down to a organized marketing campaign.

"It may be lots of little pieces," Dean said. "It may be some bricks and mortar attraction. It may be marking, it may be trails, it may be – whatever, but the coach is going to come here and help us narrow down our vision into something that's tangible. Then we'll submit our vision to the state and the state is going to take all of these visions, judge them and they're going to pick three for this pilot project."

In its letter The Great Waters and Great Prairies of Clay & Dickinson Counties Organizing Team told the state board its counties have already invested in its great place through extensive trails systems, recreation, arts, cultural opportunities and environmental awareness.

Being a top-three choice among a field of 145 applicants would be a significant accomplishment, but Dean said local organizers shouldn't stop if the state's pilot program goes elsewhere.

"If it's that important and that good of a vision, we'll find another way to implement it," Dean said. "That's what's really exciting about it."

